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December 6, 2001

Governor George H. Ryan  
Office of the Governor  
207 Statehouse  
Springfield, IL 62706

Dear Governor Ryan:

I write to encourage you to consider stockpiling potassium iodide as part of overall emergency planning in Illinois in the event of a nuclear incident and to clarify some misleading statements being made by public health officials about the value of such stockpiles. Potassium iodide works by flooding the thyroid gland with stable iodine so that the gland does not take up radioactive iodine, a fission byproduct of nuclear power plants. Children are the most vulnerable to radiation-induced thyroid diseases because their thyroid glands are very active.

In a December 4, 2001 edition of *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio reporter Richard Harris interviewed several public health officials, including Vermont Health Commissioner Jan Carney and Mike Sinclair, an official at the Illinois Division of Nuclear Safety. Dr. Carney stated that Vermont officials are considering potassium iodide stockpiling as an "additional step" along with evacuation and sheltering in preparing for the accidental or terrorist-related release of radioactivity from a nuclear reactor. I couldn't agree more that potassium iodide is appropriate as part of a comprehensive emergency plan. In fact, there is strong consensus among the World Health Organization, the American Thyroid Association, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on this issue.

The safety and efficacy of potassium iodide was formally established as a matter of Federal policy on December 15, 1978, when the Food and Drug Administration concluded that potassium iodide is a safe and effective means by which to block uptake of radioactive iodine by the thyroid gland in a radiological catastrophe, and approved its over-the-counter sale. In January 2001, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission found that potassium iodide is "a reasonable, prudent, and inexpensive supplement to evacuation and sheltering for specific local conditions."

Yet misinformation about potassium iodide continues to delay its distribution to the citizens who would need it. For example, the Illinois official mentioned above called potassium iodide "a cruel hoax" in the NPR report, and stated that "it only protects against radioactive iodine, which is just one of dozens of radioactive chemicals that would be released in a reactor accident." Such statements appear to belittle the life-

saving benefits of potassium iodide, particularly in preventing thyroid cancer in children exposed to a radioactive reactor plume. Radioactive iodine in the plume is particularly dangerous due to its high volatility, which allows it to travel farther from the point of release than less volatile isotopes, and its intermediate half-life, which allows it to persist in radioactive form for days. Most other isotopes either don't travel far from the plant or decay to stable, nonradioactive forms within seconds.

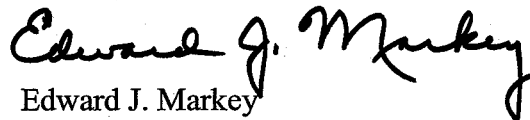
In the same broadcast, the same Illinois official observed that "it (potassium iodide) only protects one organ in the body—the thyroid gland." But the thyroid gland is the most radiation-sensitive organ in the entire body. Fifteen years after the Chernobyl accident, a host of studies have revealed no other long-term health consequence of the accident *except* thousands of additional cases of thyroid disease.

Potassium iodide is not a magic pill, but it is misleading and inaccurate to deny its value as an adjunct to evacuation and sheltering. Since potassium iodide must be taken before or within a few hours after exposure, it is prudent to have it available so that people are protected in the conceivable event that evacuation is delayed due to traffic or weather conditions.

In recent testimony before the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services noted that he was including potassium iodide in the chemical antidotes to terrorist threats for which he had requested \$47 million from President Bush, and that he is considering including potassium iodide as part of the Department of Health and Human Services' "push packs". Furthermore, he agreed with my suggestion to stockpile potassium iodide in schools near nuclear power plants, saying it had "a great deal of merit".

It is now possible for Illinois to stockpile potassium iodide using federal funds. In January of this year, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission agreed to fund stockpiles of potassium iodide to those states that request it. Thus, Illinois residents could be protected from the lifelong consequences of thyroid diseases if you ask for potassium iodide. I urge you to provide potassium iodide to all Illinois residents in the vicinity of a nuclear power plant.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey  
Member of Congress

Cc: Mr. Mike Sinclair  
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